REVOLT OF GRANNIES: THE BURSYLYSYAS KOMI FOLK ORTHODOX MOVEMENT

PIRET KOOSA
PhD Student
Department of Ethnology
University of Tartu
Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia
Research Fellow-Curator
Estonian National Museum
Veski 32, 51014 Tartu, Estonia
e-mail: piret.koosa@gmail.com

ART LEETE
Professor of Ethnology
University of Tartu
Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia
e-mail: art.leete@ut.ee

ABSTRACT
We study the role of women in the Bursylysyas Komi folk Orthodox movement. Throughout the history of the movement, women have gradually gained more authority in this religious community. The initial stage of communist rule and the final phase of the Soviet Union were periods in which women's domination in local religious life was most obvious. We argue that men lost their leadership in the movement because their way of execution of religious power was public and thus they became targets for Soviet repression. Komi women continued to keep the Bursylysyas faith alive, although they did so in a more domestic, hidden way. This enabled women to lead local religious practice throughout the Soviet period. In addition, the peculiar ecstatic practices of Bursylysyas, most fully developed during the initial period of Soviet rule, were more suitable for women in the framework of Komi traditional folk religiosity.

KEYWORDS: the Komi • Orthodox faith • religious movement • women • Soviet period

The aim of this article* is to analyse the impact of the Soviet period on the position of women in folk Orthodoxy. Particularly, we take the example of one relatively intensive local Orthodox movement, called Bursylysyas, which has spread among the Komi people since the end of the 19th century.

The Komi people live near the Ural Mountains in the north-eastern part of European Russia. According to the official census of 2002, the total number of the Komis

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(the Komi-Zyryans) was 293,000. The population of the Republic of Komi was approximately 950,000 by the end of 2009, almost 30 per cent of whom were Komi. The total size of the Republic of Komi is 416,800 km^2. Forests cover 75 per cent of the Republic of Komi territory, swamp and tundra occupies 10 per cent and only 1 per cent is cultivated agricultural land. (*Komid*; *Komimaa*; Skvoznikov 2005; 2010)

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork that we carried out in 2008 among the Upper Ezhva or Upper Vychegda Komis (*vylysezhvasayas* in Komi, *verkhnevychegodskiye komi* in Russian) of Ust-Kulom (*Kulömdin* in Komi) district in Myeldino (*Mys sikt* in Komi) village. Literature, and discussions with the few scholars who had visited Myeldino, made clear to us that the movement of Bursylysyas has played a major historical role in the social life of the 500 inhabitants of that village, and also in the surrounding villages. However, we were not really clear how prominent a position the Bursylysyas have today, or whether they even still existed. We were also interested in studying specific developments of gender roles in local religious life.

The religious domain enables us to characterise male-female roles in Komi culture. During the Soviet period, old ladies obtained a special role in religious life in villages. As the priests were absent, old ladies carried out religious ceremonies and were recognised keepers of local religiosity in general (see Sharapov 2001; Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 170; Vlasova 2003; cf. Mitrokhin 2006: 45). Today, the existence of these ladies with special religious authority gives a distinct 'aura' to the rest of the population in these local communities. Also, a faith of the other villagers becomes more 'real' because of a feeling of religious continuity.

For Tamara Dragadze (1993: 149–150), the increasing profanity of religious life in the territories of the former USSR is related to certain political practices of the communist authorities. Deportation and execution of religious specialists led to the disappearance of professional practitioners of faith. People were no longer able to turn to Orthodox priests during religious festivals or life crises. Therefore ordinary people had to adapt to the absence of he holy shrines and personnel that had earlier been considered an essential part of religious life.

Dragadze referrers to the term *domestication* when interpreting the character of religious change. Firstly, this expresses understanding of the shift in field of action from the public to the private sphere, inside people's homes. Secondly, it designates a harnessing and taming of the forces that previously seemed to stay out of the control of ordinary people – a part of the religious domain that was earlier reserved exclusively for specialists. The laity has no access to it due to the absence of professional training and sanctity.

> In such circumstances, domestication implies the attempt to gain more control for oneself. This must imply a shift of the boundary between 'profane' and 'sacred', and it suggests an enlarging of the actual mental space of the 'sacred'. (Ibid.: 150–151)

The domestication of faith is also connected to the increasing role of women in the religious sphere. Women have traditionally been more concerned with domestic everyday duties. In addition to which, the communists saw women as less threatening to public ideology and so left them freer than men in the practice of "folk customs" (ibid.: 152; Keinänen 1999: 155).

This article is focused on analysis of the local social-religious processes that provided women a leading role in the Myeldino community's religious life. At the same time, we

give a few insights into the local people's interpretations of these processes and into the way in which the active approach of these women to faith is felt in contemporary Myeldino.

FORMATION OF THE BURSYLYSYAS MOVEMENT

At the end of the 19th century, the folk Orthodox movement called Bursylysyas ('singers of good', 'good singers', or 'the ones singing hymns to God' in Komi) appeared in Myeldino village (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 218–221; Chuvyurov 2001b: 76; Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 170–171; Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2003: 150; 2007: 314; Rogachev, Zherebtsov 2004: 173).

The founder of the religious movement was local peasant Stepan Artemyevich Yermolin. Yermolin started preaching while he was the interpreter of the priest at the local church of St. John the Baptist. Inspired by practices of the Old Believers of neighbouring Pechora region, he started to conduct spiritual conversations with local peasants. He also delivered his own sermons, translated several psalms into the Komi language and wrote religious hymns. His manuscripts were inspected in Vologda Ecclesiastical Consistory and were approved by Russian Orthodox Church authorities. (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 218; Chuvyurov 2001b: 76–77; Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 181; Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 314; Rogachev, Zherebtsov 2004: 173)

Generally, the Bursylysyas followed the dogmatism and rituals of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, in the Bursylysyas faith certain peculiarities can be identified. They believed in the possibility of communicating directly with Jesus Christ, Mother of God and Angels. Such visions were interpreted as God's sign of improved hope for salvage. Spiritual conversations (*bur kõvzöm* 'good talk' in Komi) usually extended throughout the whole day and included sermons, the singing of religious hymns in the Komi language, and shared meals. During these spiritual meetings, a preacher sat under icons in the corner of a room and placed several spiritual books in front of himself. The choir sat next to him. The rest of the people sat so that they faced the icons, the preacher and the choir. Women covered their faces with headscarf and men with their hands in order to guarantee complete concentration. During prayers and singing looking into each other's eyes was prohibited because this would disturb the achievement of complete isolation. People's prayers were ecstatic; sometimes they reached a collective trance. Gatherings of 'Stepan's faith' were organised in different families' homes. Yermolin constituted that the arrangement of three meetings was equal to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a housemaster and his family. This also meant that these families had all their sins forgiven. (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 218–220; Chuvyurov 2001b: 77; Rogachev, Zherebtsov 2004: 173)

Yermolin also preached in neighbouring villages – Ust-Nem, Pozheg and Don. Leaders of the movement were exclusively men, although the majority of followers came from the local female population. Local clergy forced Yermolin to interrupt his proselytiser's practices several times and he was randomly fined and warned officially for his activities. Despite this, 'Stepan's faith' survived the Tsarist period as a kind of a semi-tolerated or semi-official religious movement. (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 221–222; see also Rogachev, Zherebtsov 2004: 174)

SOVIET AUTHORITIES' CLOSURE OF THE CHURCH AND THE BEGINNING OF FEMALE DOMINATION AMONG THE BURSYLYSYAS

Folk religious practices, unrelated to the church, were already characteristic to the Orthodox Komis before the communist revolution in 1917. These folk practices had a supportive function in the predominately church-centred religious domain. From the 1920s and 1930s, these initially semi-independent practices were transformed into specific forms of religious survival. The importance of local unprofessional religious leaders increased considerably during the Soviet era. (Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 310–313)

During the initial phase of the Soviet regime, the Bursylysyas were notably successful. At the beginning of the 1920s the Bursylysyas movement spread into eight Upper-Ezhva communities. Overall numbers of Bursylysyas increased and by 1927 more than a thousand people had joined the movement (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 251; Chuvyurov 2001b: 79; Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 171). After Stepan Yermolin's death, Stepan Parshukov became the new head of the Bursylysyas. However, his authority was not recognised to the same extent as Yermolin's leadership. Because of this, local preachers became more influential. (Gagarin 1978: 252; Chuvyurov 2001b: 79–80)

The role of women in the movement started to increase. In the 1920s, they constituted 70 per cent of the Bursylysyas. There were many among the female members of the Bursylysyas who were prophetic wanderers and, when they had an ecstatic episode, spoke in tongues and were for that reason called "Mothers of God" (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 252–253). In 1924, the Bursylysyas community of Myeldino was headed by two women, Ustinya Parshukova and Paraskovya[1] (Chuvyurov 2001b: 80; see also Gagarin 1976).

Additionally to former religious practices, the Bursylysyas introduced a new ritual of 'death and resurrection' (*raspinaniye*). While praying, some believers fell down and stayed in an ecstatic condition for an hour or two. The rest of the group sang calming prayers, but when 'the dead' started to regain consciousness, everybody shouted "Christ is resurrected!" After awakening, 'the resurrected' described their conversation with God and angels and meetings with the souls of the dead in the Other World. They made prophecies, also. Radical ascetic practices and eschatological ideas spread among the Bursylysyas. They waited for the end of the world, which they expected at Christmas 1925 and postponed the catastrophe until Whitsuntide of 1928. Rumours spread that villages on the upper course of the Ezhva River would be flooded or burnt down in a "rain of fire", and that only believers would escape. (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 253–254; Chuvyurov 2001b: 77–78, 80; see also Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2003: 162)

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Bursylysyas movement obtained certain political focus. The Soviet regime was interpreted as the expression of the Anti-Christ's power, as indicated by its active persecution of believers. The Bursylysyas tried to ignore the demands of the Soviet authorities. They avoided membership in Soviet organisations, did not pay taxes and tried to keep their children away from school (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 253–254). Bursylysyas resistance to collectivisation was especially strong. Collectivisation was interpreted as a decisive administrative measure in the fight against the believers. By 1939, 25 per cent of the private agricultural sector in Komi ASSR was constituted by inhabitants of a few villages in the Bursylysyas region (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 288).

In the 1930s the majority of the leaders of the Bursylysyas movement were arrested, while many of its members were also subjected to repressions. In 1931 the local admin-

Photo 1. The St. John the Baptist's Church in Myeldino village. Photo by Piret Koosa 2008.

istrations estimated that 15–20 per cent of the region's population belonged to the Bursylysyas. (Gagarin 1978: 254–255; Chuvyurov 2001b: 80–81; Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 171; Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 315)

In 1936, the church of St. John the Baptist was closed in Myeldino. The last holy ritual that was carried out at the church was the baptism of a boy by the last priest of the church, Mefodi. The church building was then given to the village administration in order to establish a culture house. The church building was vandalised by young Soviet activists. The church bell and cross were thrown down from the church tower. Considerable number of villagers resisted the vandalising of the church. Later, these peasants were repressed. (*Istoriya tserkvi*; Suvorov 1999)

During our fieldwork in Myeldino, one old lady (An, b. 1935)[2] described the arrest of her father:

> I cannot remember my father. He had already been in prison once. And in 1937 he was convicted, again. They started to vandalise the church, and my father protested against it. Many people gathered there and they destroyed the church. All icons and other artefacts were burnt, taken out and thrown away. But my father was born in 1895. He and a few of the others, who were around 40 years old at that time, protested. He hit some of them. He did not allow them to enter the church. He was arrested for that. There was a small cabin near the road. He was put in there. Some of the men like my father were put in there. Later he was sent to jail for three years. There was no court trial or anything.

Photo 2. The building of Myeldino village administration. Photo by Piret Koosa 2008.

The same old lady described how hidden religious practices were introduced by the Bursylysyas quickly after the church was closed:

> At that time people believed in God. They needed to pray somewhere. According to the law of that time, they were the opponents or the enemies. During the Soviet period, the law made them antagonists to Soviet power. Because of that he [my father] was sentenced. Later they continued to pray in secret. It was already forbidden, but somewhere they sang and prayed or did something else behind closed doors. As it appears, they were surveilled all the time.

This lady's husband proposed the interpretation that faith, even when followed secretly, was a positive phenomenon and destroying the church did not end well for initiators of this brutal action:

> Earlier it was prohibited but sometimes it happened that they went there anyway. They went to special houses and prayed. At that time they were scared. If they were not scared, they would not have closed the church. But those who destroyed the church were soon put into a prison by the Soviet authorities. One denounces another, and so on ... You see, and everybody was put into prison. Those who stood against the church. It means that it was not right. If you think about this – it does not make sense to destroy the church. If it was built, it is a monument that must be preserved, as they say nowadays. But at that time they destroyed it. (Al, m., b. 1938)

Photo 3. Votive cross on the former site of the chapel dedicated to the Holy Great Martyr St. Catherine, Myeldino village (hamlet of Kodzhuvdor). It was a meeting place for local Bursylysyas until the mid-2000s. Photo by Art Leete 2008.

After the church was closed, local people (mostly women) continued to perform religious rituals (the celebration of Orthodox calendar festivals, baptisms and funerals) (Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2003: 150; see also Suvorov 1999). Folk religious authority was efficiently taken over by women, as it was announced by local people during our fieldwork:

> Y (f., b. 1950): The administration was against it but our grannies sang anyway.
> V (f., b. 1955): Our village was the most religious one.
> Y: During the communist time we did not believe in anybody, just in God.

By 1941, all churches in the Komi ASSR were closed. During the 1950s, three churches were reopened. The closest newly opened churches to Myeldino functioned near Syktyvkar, in the villages of Kochpon and Yb (Rogachev 2001: 80; Taskayev, Rogachev 2004: 432; Matsuk 2004: 690). Distance between Myeldino and Yb is 350 km by river. Despite the big distance, the Myeldino grannies regularly used this good opportunity to visit the church:

> Y: During the Communist period our grannies travelled every spring to the town. They sat on the ship and travelled. You see. They travelled especially for three or four days to the church that was there in Yb.
> V: Next to Syktyvkar, there was the church. They travelled there.
> Y: There was a functioning church. All the grannies travelled there, even the weakest ones.
> V: They travelled to the town, because a man from Myeldino village served there.

> Afterwards he was buried at Ulyanovo monastery. His name was Sergei Parshukov. These grannies dragged small children with them and everybody was baptised there. Usually one granny baptised, also. First of all, the granny baptised. We had such a habit that not a priest but she baptised and did everything. This granny died just recently, she was 100 years old.
> Y: If children were born during the Soviet period, then she baptised them, anyway. (See also Suvorov 1999)

Processes that led to increasing the role of women in religious life were typical to Soviet Komi (and the whole Soviet Union).

> The process of revolutionising gender roles in the sacral sphere occurred during the 1930–40s. At that time, the Soviet power fought against religiosity ('superstitions') and repressed the carriers of religious ideas (prominent representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, Old Believers, Bursylysyas and followers of pre-Christian traditions), who were mostly men. (Il'ina, Ulyashev 2009: 159–160)

Since the 1940s, women obtained more authority among the Komi folk Orthodox communities. From the 1950s to the 1990s, only women carried out domestic baptisms in the Komi villages (ibid.: 162). By the 1970s, women constituted more than 85 per cent from the Orthodox believers in the Komi areas (Gagarin 1978: 300).

The practice of spiritual conversations and ritual of the 'death and resurrection' were interrupted at the end of the 1930s as a result of repressions. After World War II, these practices were re-established. During the same period, the Bursylysyas movement was spread from its core area to the other regions of Ust-Kulom district (Gagarin 1976; 1978: 290). According to official accounts, in 1962 there were 350 Bursylysyas followers in the Myeldino area. In 1964, officials counted members of the Bursylysyas movement at 20 in Myeldino, 40 in Pomozdino, 30 in Ust-Nem, and 20 in Timsher village. In addition to which, the Bursylysyas constituted the core of the church congregation of Kochpon church near Syktyvkar. At the same time, the officials mentioned that it was problematic to draw a clear line between the Bursylysyas and the mainstream Orthodox population. By the mid-sixties, the Bursylysyas had preserved rituals that included singing religious hymns in Komi, the Orthodox manuscript tradition, celebration of Orthodox calendar festivals, the rituals of baptism and funerals – and recently the rituals of 'death and resurrection' were still spreading. In 1970–1971, Yuri Gagarin and Nina Dukart studied religious life in villages on the Upper Ezhva Komis and discovered that 37 per cent of the local population belonged to the Bursylysyas. (Gagarin 1976; Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 314–315)

RESTORATION OF THE CHURCH AND THE REVOLT OF GRANNIES

According to a local lore, the restoration of Myeldino church by local women was predicted by fortune-teller granny Nastya, who saw in her vision another granny in the black costume of a nun with lighted candles in her hands and on her head (Suvorov 1999).

In 1989, local Myeldino administration planned to build a sports hall on the place of the destroyed church building. Komi Oblast Trade Union Committee and the Komi

Photo 4. Icon corner in the house of the last member of Kodzhuvdor hamlet's Bursylysyas community, Myeldino village. Photo by Art Leete 2008.

ASSR Ministry of Sport granted 40,000 roubles to build the sports hall, although the local people made an application to the village administration to restore the church instead. The local administration agreed with the villagers' proposal but the Trade Unions and the Ministry of Sport did not allow their money to be used to renovate the church. Because of this, the head of the Myeldino village administration, Valentin Parshukov, was called several times to the chairman of Ust-Kulom district Executive Committee. For ignoring the decision of the government, Valentin Parshukov was threatened with a court sentence. At the same time, the church congregation, with 24 members, was established in Myeldino in 1990. The majority of the village population started to demand the renovation of the church and soon afterwards the government of the Komi ASSR gave permission to restore the church. (*Istoriya tserkvi*; see also Suvorov 1999; Sivkova 2007)

In addition to the state budget money mentioned above, people of Myeldino and the neighbouring villages donated a significant amount of money for this renovation effort. Church icons and equipment that were hidden during the 1930s were brought back to the church. (*Istoriya tserkvi*; Chuvyurov 2001a: 187; Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 313)

On July the 7th, 1991, in Myeldino church the first ceremony in decades was carried out by the Orthodox priest Sergei Parshukov, who was born in Myeldino but at that time served as the priest in Yb church. (*Istoriya tserkvi*)

Our interview data indicate that the restoration of the church and reinitiation of local institutional religious life was carried out in a very passionate way. The active approach of the local grannies was interpreted as the decisive issue in the renovation process.

Y (f., b. 1950): The church was restored. Our grannies organised an uprising and after that they started to work really fast. The church was empty at that time and our chairman decided that we must build a sports hall there. But then our grannies initiated the revolt. They asked how you can build a sports hall in the church? They said that the church must be restored. They had a budget for the sports hall. But after the grannies' revolt they reassigned it for the church. You see. One of our grannies brought all the other grannies to the village soviet and they had an argument with the chairman and finally they decided to restore the church.

Earlier we did have a culture house in the church. We organised theatre plays, cinema, concerts. At first, our grannies made their prayers here by themselves. They were the managers. They performed everything. The grannies brought icons from their homes, they restored everything with their own hands. Later the priest arrived and started renovation, again. The priest lived in the house of the granny who initiated the revolt. They started to organise everything together.

V (f., b. 1955): Our church was the very first one in the region to be renovated. Nobody did any renovation at that time. It was the time of the Soviets, nobody believed in God too much. But here they started to arrange everything and started to build the church.

Y: Yes. Our grannies already prayed.

A more moderate and ambivalent evaluation of the role of local grannies in these events can also be found in Myeldino:

An (f., b. 1935): The church was destroyed. But anyway, the village administration rebuilt it. They started to build a sports hall, but later they started this...

Al (m., b. 1938): Those who prayed to God demanded that the church must be rebuilt. The village administration built it and gave it over to people.

An: You see, their grandfathers destroyed it, but the grandchildren rebuilt it. The grandfather of the same chairman of our village soviet vandalised the church. My [first] husband was the chairman of the village soviet twice. Perhaps, the first time he was chairman for five years and second time seven years. He wanted to restore the church all the time. But there was no money. The district did not give any money. You see. And he did not manage to do it. After the turn [in early 1990s] they started again. After that they managed to agree with the bosses. Earlier the church was decorated and later it was destroyed. Everything was destroyed and later they need some money. And again, people had to provide it. They turned to people and said let's renovate the church. It seems that it was not a good idea to destroy it.

Thus, during the Soviet period, women took over the leading role in the Bursylysyas movement. Women developed their leadership gradually and the whole process was kept more or less hidden. Soviet officials and scholars managed to document the Bursylysyas movement regularly although there was no official church structure or registered religious organisation present. At the end of the 1980s, the conflict relating to the plans to renovate the church building made the grannies role on local religious landscape explicit, and perhaps even supported the growth of their spiritual influence and motivation.

THE POWER OF THE GRANNIES – IS THERE ANYTHING LEFT?

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the character of religious enthusiasm has changed in Komi society as well as in Russia in general. The Bursylysyas' grannies dominated local religious practice and had considerable influence on social life in general in Myeldino twenty years ago. Today the position of the Bursylysyas has changed considerably and it is not easy to estimate the degree of preservation of their practices or the number of followers.

Chuvyurov and Smirnova estimate that the Bursylysyas movement has suffered a considerable decline since the beginning of the 1990s:

> At present there does not exist any religious community in Upper-Vychegda, which could be directly related to the Bursylysyas. At the same time, the manuscript tradition created by this movement continues to exist and develop actively. (Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 171; see also Chuvyurov 2001b: 81)

However, a few years later the same authors wrote about the Bursylysyas as a well-preserved vernacular religious movement in Myeldino and neighbouring villages. (Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 315–316)

Before our trip to Myeldino, we met Alexander Chuvyurov and discussed with him the problem of preserved Bursylysyas practices. Chuvyurov visited Myeldino in 2001 and 2002. He has made assurances that, in general, the Bursylysyas movement has vanished and only a few old ladies organised singing rituals in a part of Myeldino village far from the church (Kuryador). According to Chuvyurov, the Orthodox priest of Myeldino church, Tikhon had fought impatiently and rather successfully against Bursylysyas practices. Priest Tikhon has a strong influence on most of the Myeldino grannies and as he does not tolerate "the old mode of faith", Bursylysyas practices are almost lost. (Personal communication with A. Chuvyurov, 2008)

Another Komi scholar, Oleg Ulyashev, told us that Bursylysyas are even today very active and there are no indications of disappearance. Even if the priest does not like what the Bursylysyas grannies do, they practise their singing and funeral customs in a somewhat hidden way. (Personal communication with O. Ulyashev, 2008)

The status of the Myeldino grannies is also high among believers in the other villages of the area. For example, in district centre Ust-Kulom, people were convinced that in Myeldino the faith has been preserved better than in other places, as one active church-goer told us: "In Myeldino there is the real old faith, because the grannies are still alive" (K, f, b. 1950).[3]

If we summarise the information that it was possible to gather before our trip to Myeldino, the impression concerning the contemporary religious situation there was ambivalent. We did not know what to expect. It was unclear if the Bursylysyas faith was still flourishing (although perhaps in a hidden way) or if the local people had already abandoned it.

Our own overall impressions concerning the religious situation in Myeldino became somehow contradictory as well. On the one hand, a few of the old ladies who participated in the grannies' revolt are still alive and dominate local vernacular religious attitudes. And for sure, many (may be even the majority) of the people in the village have been involved into some Bursylysyas rituals during their lifetime. On the other hand,

not every religiously motivated granny identifies herself publicly as a Bursylysyas, although their religious practices and approach resemble those of the movement. Even if people do not actively follow the Bursylysyas faith, this approach has contributed to the religious atmosphere in the village and everybody has grown up in these conditions, or must have had to adapt to the situation. At least on some level, even today the Bursylysyas faith constitutes a natural religious context for everybody in the village.

People do not attend church actively in Myeldino. When we a visited church ceremony during our stay in Myeldino, apart from the priest there were only two ladies – one girl singing and one old lady standing in the church store. In any case, even this modest presence reflects the fact that religious affairs are considered to be exclusively a female domain in the village:

> Y: Nowadays we rarely attend the church. It's because the church service starts at 8 but we must be at work at that time. But at least at Christmas and Easter we go there. Mainly women and children go to the church. Just recently children have started to attend. But men rarely go there.
> V: Men attend the church only during Easter. At that time there are plenty of men. I do not know why but the younger generation does not go there at all.
> Y: Men attend the church during Christmas, also. But women, perhaps, like it more... They want to change their family life to be better or something like that. What do men need? They drink vodka and that's it. But during church holidays the church is full.
> V: Women go to church infrequently, also. Sometimes only three women stand there in the church. Although everybody has icons at home, they don't attend church often. Perhaps they are ill, I do not know. But during the church holidays many people attend.

At the same time, we cannot consider that the frequency of church-going adequately indicates the degree of the Myeldino grannies' religiosity. Their spirituality is too passionate for the priest and some of these ladies have even stopped visiting the church.

> I asked about the participation of RZ, SP and OM in the grannies' revolt at the end of the 1980s. VA assured me that they all took part in these events very actively. RZ and SP attend the church very often. OM stopped visiting the church a few years ago. She disliked the priest because he refused to allow her to sing loudly in the church. Although OM is a very true believer, she has not attended church for several years. If SP considers that the priest does something wrong in the church, SP corrects and teaches him. RZ carries out baptism and funerals. Before the priest arrived, the Parshukov family was responsible for baptism. A number of priests originate from that family, also. (FM, Art Leete's field diary)

A certain principal attitude to faith among Myeldino population can be illustrated by the following fact: by 2008, protestant movements had not succeeded in recruiting any members in Myeldino. At the same time, from every surrounding village some people had joined some of the different protestant religious groups that have carried out missionary work in the region over the last couple of decades.

Our field experience allows us to note that a definite feeling of communal religious belonging, although, perhaps a vague one, is grounded by a core of the most devoted

old ladies. These true believers differ considerably from the other grannies we have met in the other Komi regions we have visited over several years of fieldwork. The Myeldino grannies' faith is very strongly conceptualised and experienced. Everything they do and every story they tell reflects this deeply-felt faith. Their entire existence is connected to their religious ideology. The more radical grannies do not tolerate any other view on spiritual issues.

In the Myeldino region even today, a considerable part of the local population is actively interested in Orthodox religious life (Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2003: 150). Very obviously, grannies play a major role in nurturing communities' religious feelings or, at least, sympathy towards Russian Orthodox traditions.

DISCUSSION

The role of women in local the Russian Orthodox religious landscapes became prominent during the Soviet period. In all parts of Russia, mostly elderly ladies constitute the majority of believers in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Grannies dominate the core of active believers as well as groups of assistants to ROC priests. Grannies bring their grandchildren to church, introduce them to church ceremonies and provide a preliminary religious education at home. (Voronina 1994: 75)

For a better understanding of women's dedication to faith and the preservation of religious traditions in the anti-religious context of Soviet Union, one must think about women's religious attitudes and practices from their own viewpoint. Communist authors have introduced a stereotypical view of "women's weak character and susceptibility paired with the general ignorance" that has made them "easy victims of manipulation by the Church, which, as the handmaiden of capitalists, has moulded women into humble and obedient servants" (Keinänen 1999: 155). This stereotype does not correspond to women's self-understanding. They are not just passive objects of religion but active "agents and participants in their own right in the realm of religion" (ibid.: 156). It is important to understand how women themselves interpret their role in the religious domain and how general social developments influence the dynamics of change in their religious roles.

> [T]he centre of women's religious activity lay outside the official Church institutions. Women played key roles as ritual and religious functionaries within the unofficial, popular religious sphere. (Ibid.: 159)

From the 1950s to the 1980s, grannies were the main, and actively motivated, experts of Orthodox tradition among the population of the USSR. As there was usually no alternative to their knowledge, their understanding of Orthodoxy was accepted by the surrounding population. However, this could differ considerably from the principal canon of the ROC. (Mitrokhin 2006: 45)

In addition, Il'ina and Ulyashev (2009: 162–163) argue that in the post-Soviet period, misunderstanding between a strengthening ROC and Komi women's religious groups can be detected. Women follow specific folk Orthodox religious traditions that were developed during the Soviet decades and which provide a prominent role in religious life for older women.

Conflict between institutional and folk interpretations of the Orthodox faith and rituals is quite explicit in Myeldino. It is obvious that this relative conflict of religious authority is commonly recognised in the village and it is sharper than in most of the other Komi regions. At the same time we can say that the relationship between the ROC and vernacular religious leaders is somewhat ambivalent in Myeldino.

Women have become active and dominant religious agents in Myeldino as a result of local peculiarities of social development, but also due to the specific practices of the Bursylysyas. Grannies' particular expertise derives from distinctive ritualistic practices of the Bursylysyas (revelation during rituals of 'dying and resurrection'). These peculiarities cannot be related to the standard developments of the vernacular Orthodox faith. The movement "possessed several similar features (prophes[y], revelations, etc.) [to] the Russian mystic-ecstatic movements (Khlysty, Pentecostalists)" (Chuvyurov, Smirnova 2003: 170; see also Chuvyurov 2001b: 76, 82; Gagarin 1978: 218–221).

Pentecostal-like vernacular revelation is also known in the practice of the Russian peasant Orthodox faith. Sometimes, folk prophesy was the result of assumed contact with the Mother of God (Panchenko 2004: 333–336; Raudalainen 2004: 149). These revelations could be rudiments of more archaic cultural practices (Panchenko 2004: 337).

According to Alexander Panchenko, prophesy through ecstatic revelations and glossolalia submit a specific mechanism to social control inside the religious groups of the Russian Orthodox Khlysty and Skoptsy sects[4] (ibid.: 341) and cause adjustments to everyday life. This stabilisation is achieved through recognition of permanent contact with a sacred domain (ibid.: 259–262).

Traditional glossolalia – *loua*, *lo sheva* – is known among the Komis as an outcome of sorcery (Sidorov 1997 [1928]: 106–138; see also Panchenko 2004: 324–325). Similar ROC-related ecstatic practices have been characteristic to the northern Russia since the 17th century. Epidemics of ecstatic possession have been documented several times. The roots of this phenomenon can be traced back even to the earlier pre-Christian past of people in this area. (Panchenko 2004: 324–339)

The Komis traditionally believed that women could experience *sheva* much easier than men. In some regions, a majority of women were supposed to be affected by *sheva*. *Sheva* was caused mainly by evil spirits that entered the human body as a result of sorcery (Sidorov 1997 [1928]: 107–135; Il'ina 2003: 300). Sidorov (1997 [1928]: 129) has documented a case of glossolalia that took place during a church ceremony. Similar features were known among the Russian peasant population – i.e. the spreading of glossolalia among women (Panchenko 2004: 338) and cases of ecstatic behaviour in church (ibid.: 336). It has been argued that this kind of ecstatic experience can be interpreted as unofficial ecstatic feminist reactions to rapid social change or moral collapse and an ecstatic counter-culture (Raudalainen 2004: 150).

The ROC treated glossolalia generally as possession of a person by an evil spirit, and as blasphemy because it was not part of Orthodox Church customs. However, in the 1860s the ROC recognised glossolalia as a phenomenon that proves the tangibility of the Orthodox faith. (Panchenko 2004: 326–327)

The practice of glossolalia demonstrates how the Bursylysyas developed religious practice that was in polyphonic dialogue with both the ROC and vernacular religiosity. At the same time, sporadic parallels with Pentecostals can be detected,[5] although it is difficult to draw any precise conclusions from the available data concerning this rela-

tionship of ecstatic practices and gender-specific power dynamics within Bursylysyas' practice.

Bursylysyas has played a prominent role in preserving vernacular Orthodoxy in the region (Smirnova, Chuvyurov 2007: 315). The character of this continuation is connected to specific actions applied by power structures and local community reactions to these attempts at change.

The disappearance of an official Church structure from the Komi religious landscape in the Soviet period affected the Bursylysyas directly. However, they had better prospects of becoming accustomed to priestless religious practice than ordinary Orthodox peasants. By the end of the Tsarist period the Bursylysyas had developed an alternative religious network that was able to replace church practices with vernacular traditions quite smoothly. The Bursylysyas were able to adapt to Soviet restrictions with relative success. Myeldino became a significant Komi religious centre. Signs of this powerful faith can be traced even today during brief ethnographic inspection.

Although the Soviet period's folk Orthodox practices were generally dominated by women in all regions, the religious passion of Myeldino's grannies is quite extraordinary. Originally, the Bursylysyas movement was created and headed by men. Closure and vandalism of the local church was followed by the arrest of the male leaders of this semi-independent religious network, which enabled women to take over leadership in the Bursylysyas communities. Restoration of the church became a powerful religious manifestation of Myeldino grannies, re-establishing their spiritual authority publicly. Consequently, the partial dependence of the Bursylysyas on the Church caused the disappearance of men from the local religious landscape and helped to concentrate spiritual authority with women.

Social dynamics and dramatic ruptures in institutional religious practices have had a certain impact on public expressions of the Myeldino grannies' faith. Yet if we try to think from the perspective of a grannies' 'agenda', it seems that they follow the faith correctly, as it has been settled in their shared experience.

NOTES

1 Gender issues in the leadership of the Bursylysyas during this period remain open. Other sources indicate that men continued to play a leading role in the movement until the 1930s.

2 All quotations of the interviews below are excerpts of our fieldwork materials among Upper-Ezhva Komis in 2008 (FM).

3 The fact that people from the surrounding areas talk about Myeldino as the place where "a lot of real Orthodox people live and the real faith has been preserved" is also documented by Suvorov (1999); it seems to be common knowledge in the region.

4 Panchenko (2004: 260–262) recognises (as do Chuvyurov and Smirnova 2003) that Skoptsy and Khlysty had several similarities in their religious practices (such as glossolalia, revelations) to the practices of Pentecostals.

5 Pentecostals appeared in Ust-Kulom district only in 2000. Even today there is no connection between them and the Bursylysyas. There are certain similarities – in their ecstasy and mysticism – that indicate some coherence in character of these religious orientations.

6 We found the manuscript hanging on the wall of Myeldino's culture house. Despite our attempts, we were unable to discover the authors of the text. According to the manager of the local library, it was written by several Myeldino school students.

SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork materials of the authors among the Upper-Ezhva Komis (*vylyezhvasayas*), September-October 2008.

Istoriya tserkvi = History of the Church of St. John the Baptist in Myeldino (История Мыёлдинской Иоанно-Предтеченской церкви). Copy of the manuscript in authors' personal archive.[6]

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